

ICE re-ups deal with detention center it said did not meet standards



Moore Haven, Florida —

Abraham Sano still remembers the first phone call he made after he said he was thrown “in the hole” at the Glades County Detention Center in Moore Haven, Florida.

“I called my mom,” he told CNN.

That was 2021. Sano, who is from Liberia and has since been deported there, recalls feeling like his body was burning.

“The first shot of pepper spray went in my ear all the way down my face,” he told CNN. After that he said he was thrown in solitary confinement. “My body was burning for, like, days because the pepper spray residue was still on my body.”

According to Sano and his former immigration lawyer, Katie Blankenship, this all started when Sano and more than a dozen other detainees were awakened in the middle of the night and beaten up by guards.

Sano told CNN he was granted political asylum in the US but was later arrested on a robbery charge.

The Glades facility is run by the Glades County Sheriff's Office in south-central Florida, west of Lake Okeechobee. After a 15-year arrangement, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement announced in March 2022 during the Biden administration that it would pause its use of the jail, noting that "any future use of the facility will be dependent on fully addressing any conditions that do not meet detention standards."

ICE added that the pause was also due to "persistent ongoing concerns related to the provision of detainee medical care."

Yet, in April this year, as deportations skyrocketed under the second Trump administration, ICE reinstated its contract with Glades County. In an email, ICE told CNN it had determined that Glades can help "clear the backlog" of

undocumented immigrants in the country.

Regarding Sano's claims, ICE told CNN that the detainee refused multiple orders and that a "burst" of pepper spray was used. Once Sano was restrained, ICE said he was "immediately ... treated by medical and cleared."

Blankenship maintains that three years after its ICE contract was canceled, Glades is still not fit for detaining immigrants. There have been no announcements or documentation of improvements at the facility, she said.

"It is unfit to be anything even close to use for immigration detention," she told CNN.

Claims of poor medical treatment

Sano isn't the only former detainee from Glades with a story to tell.

Michael Wallace, who has since been deported to his home country of Jamaica, has epilepsy. He told CNN he was undocumented and arrived at Glades in July 2021 after being picked up on an immigration violation. He

said he had his medication in hand, yet it was withheld by the facility, which caused him to have life-threatening seizures.

"It just disappeared; it's gone. I was wondering what's going on," said Wallace, who spent about seven months at Glades.

Blankenship, who represented him, said: "His medical records quite literally say, 'Do not skip this medication.' ... He has epilepsy. It's serious, in all caps — 'do not skip medication.' And they just flat out refuse (to give it to him) when they had his medication."

Without his medicine, Wallace told CNN that he sometimes got dizzy and ended up in a hospital away from the detention center.

Another immigration detainee, Rollin Manning, said he was exposed to a carbon monoxide leak in the kitchen at Glades in the fall of 2021 and nearly died. He [told CNN affiliate WINK-TV](#) in 2022 that "I began to feel sick. I was sweating uncontrollably. I could not catch my breath. My chest was tight."

Blankenship, the immigration attorney, also represented Manning.

"He had to be airlifted out of Glades to Orlando to go through a massive detox system to save his life. (Glades workers) took no measures to treat him," she told CNN.

CNN obtained an investigative report from the Glades County Sheriff's Office about that carbon monoxide leak. It found that a staff member turned off a fan and supervisors "failed to provide (a) safe working environment for detainee(s)."

The Glades County Detention Center has a guaranteed minimum of 500 beds, according to its contract with ICE. In addition to ICE detainees, it also houses inmates for the county and prisoners detained by US Marshals.

The Glades County Sheriff's Office, which operates the prison, declined to comment on the specific allegations by detainees or Blankenship.

They did send us a statement, saying, "The Glades County Sheriff's Office remains committed to providing safe and humane detention services to the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement. We have worked in tandem with our federal partners to insure (sic) our detention services are in compliance

and meet the highest of standards required by ICE."

But the immigration attorney told CNN she has collected medical records from more than 30 detainees to support allegations of poor medical treatment at Glades between 2021 and 2023.

"If you couple the well-documented medical neglect with the toxic chemical spray, the carbon monoxide leak, the severe beatings of African and Muslim immigrants," Blankenship said, "... There's an overwhelming amount of evidence as a basis to close down this facility."

CNN also obtained copies of dozens of grievances filed by Glades detainees in 2021 and 2022, including complaints about being served spoiled, partially frozen, or insect-ridden food.

A spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security, of which ICE is a part, told CNN via email, "The allegations regarding Glades County Detention Center were found unsubstantiated ... ICE provides comprehensive medical care from the moment an alien enters ICE custody."

Blankenship remains skeptical.

She, along with a group called the "[Shut Down Glades Coalition](#)," has filed more than two dozen complaints against the facility. She says those complaints "resulted in various investigations and site visits over the years" and eventually led ICE to pause using the prison.

"That is exactly the same facility that it was years ago," she said. "I don't have any reason to believe that there has been any correction or any adjustment or even any interest in making sure that this facility does anything to treat people humanely."

ICE says operations now meet standards

CNN made repeated calls and emails to the Glades County Sheriff's Office, asking for documentation of any improvements since the detention center was last used by the federal government. None of that information was provided to us.

CNN also reached out to the Glades County Manager and the Board of County Commissioners for comment.

In an email to CNN, ICE did not cite any recent changes or improvements at Glades. The agency said it is "committed to ensuring detainees housed in its facilities are treated with dignity and respect and facility operators meet ICE detention standards."

ICE also wrote that prior to housing immigration detainees at Glades this year, it did a "pre-occupancy inspection of the facility to ensure its operations complied with ICE standards."

Blankenship said she believes the detention center is being operated as a moneymaker for Glades County, which incentivizes officials to cut costs.

In 2006, Glades Correctional Development Corporation issued bonds to raise \$33 million for the construction of the detention center. The issuing document obtained by CNN described the purpose of securing a federal contract to house detainees — primarily from ICE — as “producing economic benefits to the County.”

“They don’t get the money that they want if they improve these conditions because they would have to actually provide real medical care ... which would cost more money. So, then it’d be less money for the county,” Blankenship said.

“They would have to provide food that’s not freezing cold or filled with bugs or hair. All this stuff that we hear about constantly ... that would cost money,” she added. “Getting them clothes that don’t have holes and bloodstains in them, that would cost money. Providing sheets and blankets to people costs money.”

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When CNN asked DHS about this, Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin responded with a statement, saying in part, "ICE takes its commitment to promoting safe, secure, and humane environments for those in our custody very seriously. It is a longstanding practice to provide comprehensive medical care from the moment an alien enters ICE custody. ICE is regularly audited and inspected by external agencies to ensure that all its facilities comply with performance-based national detention standards."

McLaughlin also told us, "As part of reopening of this facility, DHS improved the food service, commissary, and installed tablets for detainees to file grievances and to be able to make video calls to their lawyers and family members."

CNN cannot confirm any improvements were made since ICE would not give us access to the Glades facility, nor did they provide any evidence such changes were made.

According to Blankenship, "The immigration system is working exactly how they want it to. It is a system in its creation that is meant to be a practice of inhumanity for profit."